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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to obtain teachers' opinions on school prayer and the proposed school prayer amendment currently before the United States Senate. Fifty-five teachers and two student teachers completed a seven page questionnaire which surveyed their personal religious practices and beliefs, their attitudes toward the proposed amendment, and their attitudes toward the general concept of school prayer. As a group, the teachers were largely Protestant or Catholic, with four individuals identifing themselves as Buddhist, agnostic, atheistic or having no religious affiliation. No persons affiliated with the Jewish or Moslem faiths participated. Results indicated that the school prayer issue has the potential to split teachers along religious and philosophical lines for the first time in American History. (JD)

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SCHOOL PRAYER -- THE POLARIZATION POTENTIAL

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ABSTRACT

Religion and politics may impact our public schools in the near future. School prayer is a favorite issue of conservatives and fundamentalists concerned over an apparant loss of morality in America. In the summer of 1984, the Eastern Washington University Department of Education conducted an in-depth survey with 57 practicing classroom teachers. Research indicates that the school prayer issue has the potential to split teachers along religious and philosophical lines for the first time in American history.

SCHOOL PRAYER -- THE POLARIZATION POTENTIAL

If a school prayer amendment is adopted by Congress, will public school teachers split along religious and philosophical lines? This research sampling says yes.

While the adoption of a school prayer amendment is being vigorously debated in the larger social context of America, public school educators -- those primarily responsible for implementing whatever amendment might be passed -- have been largely silent. This silence may represent a natural desire to avoid a subject that enrages advocates and opponents alike; or it may reflect the hope that the school prayer issue will simply disappear, leaving the public schools unscathed.

Based on a recent research sampling conducted by the Eastern Washington University Department of Education, we believe the educators must begin addressing the school prayer amendment issue. Adoption of the amendment seems destined to polarize teachers along religious and philosophical lines, a possibly devastating situation for public schools already under seige in 1984.

This paper does not prescribe future actions or attitudes on the part of educational representatives or institutions. We neither support nor oppose the concept of school prayer. Through this research we hoped to open a dialogue on a sensitive issue which educators can no longer ignore. As reported by CBS correspondent Bruce Morton on September 12, 1984, "This issue [politics and religion] will not go away, even after the [1948] election." And, as noted by the September 17, 1984, issue of Newsweek, abortion, tuition tax credits and school prayer constitute the agenda of politically active conservatives and fundamentalists.

Indeed, school prayer has been a simmering issue for over 20 years, since the Supreme Corut ruled in 1963 that public, tax-supported schools could not conduct

an activity "which is either an advancement or inhibition of religion. . ." as defined by Justice Thomas Clark.[1]

School prayer advocates have argued that its prohibition does inhibit their religious practice, creating a "religion of secularism." Supporters of the Court's decision cite the Constitutional separation of church and state, and have argued that the decision does not restrict private prayer, the study of comparative religions, or even the objective study of a single religion.

In the spring of 1984, advocates brought a school prayer amendment before the United States Senate. Although other wordings have been proposed, this amendment received the widest support, historically, prior to its defeat:

> Nothing in this Constitution should be construed to prohibit individual or group prayer in public schools or other institutions. No person should be required by the United States nor any state to participate in prayer. Neither the United States nor any state shall compose the words of any prayer to be said in public schools.

Supporters felt that the wording of this particular amendment overcame many traditional objections to public school prayer, including the First Amendment Prohibition against the establishment of a state religion. Fueled by phone banks, mailing lists, demonstrations and person contact supporters nearly succeeded in achieving Senate passage for the 1984 school prayer amendment.

Were the public schools ready in 1984 to implement prayer in the classroom? It was this question that lead us in the summer of 1984, to survey the attitudes of public school teachers toward school prayer.

Fifty-five teachers and two student teachers, all enrolled in Eastern Washington University summer classes, voluntarily completed a 7-page question-

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[1]Collie, William E., The Relationship Between Religion and Public Education. Phi Delta Kappan. September, 1983, pp. 57-59.

naire which surveyed their personal religious practices and beliefs, their attitudes toward the proposed amendment and their attitudes toward the general concept of school prayer. The fifty-seven respondents came from 25 Washington State school districts, 8 Idaho districts, 2 Montana, 2 South Dakota, and one California district. Teaching experience ranged from zero to 24 years.

As a group, the teachers were largely Protestant (72%) or Catholic (21%) Christians. Only four individuals (7%) identified themselves as Buddhist, agnostic, atheistic or having no religious affiliation whatsoever. No persons affiliated with the Jewish or Moslem faiths participated in the survey.

Again as a group, the teachers reported a high incidence of religious practice. For example, 80 percent report weekly on regular church attendance. Seventy percent said that "I find myself praying every day," and another 32 percent said they prayed on "special occasions." (Multiple answers were allowed). Seventy-two percent said they "try to live the precepts of my faith every day," and a full 77 percent credited their religious faith with providing their moral and ethical standards. Most germane to the issue at hand, 63 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Prayer has the power to change the world for the better."

A high level of agreement was achieved when the teachers were asked who should be the primary religious teacher of children. Seventy percent named "the church to which the children belong," and 84 percent said "the home." Significant in the context of the total survey, nine percent said the school should be the primary teacher.

Although we found a rather homogenous group in terms of religious affiliation, religious practice and religious beliefs, sharp differences

emerged when the questionnaire shifted to the issue of school prayer and the proposed Constitutional amendment.

Given the opportunity to rank 10 values that should be taught in the classroom, for example, 67 percent ranked "reverence for God" last or next to last. Nine percent ranked it first or second. Eleven percent ranked "reverence for God" as a middle value. Accounting for a reduced response, several respondents appended remarks indicating that "reverence for God" was not an appropriate value at all in the context of the classroom.

In relation to the proposed amendment, respondents were first asked to indicate whether they supported or opposed its adoption. Thirty-five percent opposed the amendment; forty percent favored it; and a large percentage (33%) said they weren't sure or wanted another option.

We next asked respondents to tell us why they favored or opposed the adoption of the amendment. The answers revealed perhaps the deepest split in the questionnaire results. Of those who indicated opposition to the amendment, 85 percent said they did so because they were strongly opposed to group prayer in the school. But of those who supported the amendment, only 22 percent said they strongly supported school prayer; eighty-seven percent said they had no strong feelings about school prayer, but that the amendment appeared to give schools and teachers a choice regarding participation.

In short, those who opposed the amendment appeared to do so from a position of deep commitment. The same can be said for a small core of advocates who consistently supported pro-amendment positions. A rather significant number of respondents were not sure or had no strong feelings either way.

Another analysis can be made of the questionnaire data. Under the survey of religious practices and beliefs, we included a question designed to reveal religious tolerance. People who marked "I am content to practice my religion without asking others to do the same" and "my respect for other religions prohibits me from imposing my views on other people," were judged to be religiously tolerant. Of these people, 63 percent opposed the adoption of the amendment, and 25 percent said they weren't sure.

Once again, although the sampled group appeared to be generally homogenous, deeper divisions can be found beneath the surface of the answers. A clear split develops when respondents are asked to tell whether they would feel "comfortable" or "uncomfortable" in applying the proposed amendment to classroom practice. Forty-six percent said "comfortable;" 51 percent said "uncomfortable," even though other survey data indicated a majority practiced personal prayer and believed in its power.

When asked about direct applications of prayer in the school or classroom, our sample group

* appeared confused about the "separation of church and state" issue, with 37% saying separation was threatened by school prayer, 39% saying it wasn't threatened, and 27% not sure;
* generally agreed (88 percent) that school prayer would "not significantly change student discipline;"
* said that school prayers, if implemented, should be silent (74%);
* said that teachers should not receive special religious training in order to lead prayers (49%);

* split over circumstances in which prayer might be appropriate; 37% said that prayer might be used in "a family or personal crisis affecting one of the students, yet 44% indicated that no circumstances presented appropriate instances for school prayer;

8 generally opposed (49%) prayer meetings or Bible study held on school grounds.

Most interesting, we asked our respondents to tell us what they would do if a school prayer amendment were passed by Congress. The options and answers bear repeating:

1) I would actively work to include group prayer in my school or classroom activities (25%).

2) I would not be overjoyed, but would comply with the amendment's spirit and intent (30%)

3) I would only comply with the amendment's provisions if forced to do so (23%).

4) I would actively work for the repeal of the amendment (9%)

5) Other 12%).

These answers show that 55 percent, apparently drawn from both advocates of and opponents of school prayer, would comply (many without enthusiasm) to a Constitutional school prayer amendment. A lesser number (32%) would actively oppose the implementation of school prayer.

While these two groups may seem vaguely theoretical today, they will not be so in the future if the Constitutional school prayer amendment is passed. Take, for example, the seemingly simple instance of a prayer held prior to a

a school assembly. Seventy-five percent of the survey respondents felt this was an appropriate time for school prayer. How will the 25 to 51 percent of the teachers -- not students -- who oppose or "feel uncomfortable" with this practice react during the prayer time? How will they explain their actions and reasoning to students, to other faculty, or to administrators who evaluate and re-hire them? And how will administrators deal fairly with this and other instances in which school prayer may involve educators and students outside the classroom as well as within?

Although an individual teacher may not be required by the proposed amendment to implement school prayer within his or her classroom, each must address the practice when it is carried out in large assemblies, over the school intercom, or in the presence of other educators.

We believe this issue now deserves the attention and concern of educators at all levels -- state, district and individual school. Of the fifty-seven respondents, only 15 told us that their school districts had a stated policy toward religious practice in the schools. Without the beginnings of a dialogue, the passage of a school prayer amendment may catch educators unprepared to deal with deep schisms among faculty, or between faculty and the community. Without the beginnings of a dialogue, a Constitutional amendment may be passed without reference to its eventual effects on classroom practice. We suggest:

* that additional research probe educators' attitudes toward school prayer;
* that the applications of school prayer be studied in a non-judgmental way, to determine effects on school time, school morale, etc.,

* that processes be established for a dialogue between church groups, the schools and educators on this issue;
* that educators begin talking to each other about the ramifications of school prayer amendment passage.

From dialogue and discussion, appropriate stances will emerge. Perhaps the schools will learn to work creatively with the school prayer issue; or they may develop additional rationale for its defeat or acceptance. Whatever the eventual outcome, the school prayer issue is too important for the future of public schools to abdicate decision-making power in this vital instance. The voices of professional educators should add another perspective to the national debate over prayer in the public schools.

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